Mariner Family Conference
Sunday, July 28, 1996

Some of the best times and most important experiences and deepest friendships in my ministry have happened because of Presbyterian Mariners.

I had been called to my second church, Bethany Presbyterian Church, Lafayette, Indiana, a 15 year-old NCD which had blossomed, grown quickly, leveled off and started a precipitous decline.

A young congregation, all or most of us in our 30s or 40s; all or most totally absorbed in the demands of parenting

young children, keeping up with mortgage payments, careers, fighting crab grass, coaching Little League, music lessons, orthodontist bills -- not to mention coping with ten year-old marriages.

We worshipped together, but something was missing at the heart of our experience of the faith and church.

One night Sue and I were invited to monthly Mariners at ---- -- a Luau -- I still remember it. We sheepishly found garish Hawaiian shirts, rolled our pants up to mid calf, put leis around our necks, dined on pork and pineapple shish-kebabs -- and then played games.

I recall my first, unsuccessful attempt at the limbo.

After a brief business meeting and prayer, we went home -- great time.

We gathered four other couples our age -- told them about it and one month later the BPC Mariners was launched -- with a Luau -- same menu, same games. To our surprise, 20 other couples came and for the next four years it grew and became the backbone of what was shortly a growing and lively congregation.

Among other things, we had good programs on parenting, the first in the city on

sex education ... but the best part of it was the opportunity to share an important part of our faith journey. Many of those friendships have continued over the years and are very precious.

A confession: we never became part of the national organization. But we borrowed concept and plans and the critical commitment to families, marriage, parenting, family ministries.

There is no more important issue and I congratulate you for your commitment.

I'm grateful for your spirit as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) enters a

new era -- in a sense you are pioneers. We will not be doing business as usual out of national headquarters in the future.

I know it did not make you happy initially -- but your emerging partnership with the PC(USA) is a model of how we must learn to be a church in the future.

It is not a diminishment of the importance of your work, or of the issues -- simply an example of our church in the process of reconfiguring, realigning, adjusting to the new realities that mission and ministry will

not be initiated or funded from the top down but from the bottom up.

Thank you for what you do -- keep it up.

I'd like to think with you about what it means to be a family today -- under the general topic "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child."

It's an old African proverb. It is also the title of a wonderful children's book by Jane Cowen Fletcher.

The setting is Africa. Everyone in the village is going to market, carrying

produce, pottery, cloth to sell and trade.

Yemi, a little girl, is given the important task, for the first time, of caring for her baby brother.

Yemi feels grown up and important bearing with pride the sole responsibility for her brother's well-being.

At the market, Kokou wanders off. Yemi is beside herself. He will be lost, she thinks; hungry, thirsty, hot, tired and in danger. No such thing happens, of course. The little boy wanders from

market stall to stall and is cared for at each by other men and women from the village; given food, drink, water to cool him, a mat to nap on, pats and smiles, and at the end of the day, when the mat vendor returns him to his family, Yemi has learned the lesson her mother and the other people already know: "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child."

Margaret Mead said that the nuclear family -- mother, father and children living apart from extended family -- is a recent invention and not a very good one. It takes a village ...

You know the story about Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to Jerusalem when he was twelve and discovering on the way home that he is lost, apparently. The point of the story has to do with Jesus conversing with the learned teachers of the law in the Temple but in the middle of the narration, there is a bit of ancient Jewish wisdom. Luke 2:44 reads,

"Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. They started to look for him among their relatives and friends."

It is a description of a cultural norm, extended family and friends, a village, caring for a child.

J. Randolph Taylor, former President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, tells about his early life as a child in China. His parents were missionaries and when he was three his mother died tragically. His father gathered his five sons, carried them across the Pacific and across the continent until they settled in North Carolina at a place called Montreat where there were homes for retired missionaries and missionaries on furlough. There, Randy Taylor remembers,

"He put us out and we ran freely on the hills in part because of the knowledge of family and kin, and missionary kin who would take care of us. I know that I owe my life to God and to my mother who bore me and my father who raised me and also to this enormous extended family of missionary kin who surrounded me with the irrefutable evidence of community and caring." [Journal For Preachers, "Pentecost," 1995]

That is part of what is going on when we baptize babies. There is theological affirmation to be sure. God's amazing goodness and grace is nowhere more eloquently expressed than in the gift of

life, given to parents, but given to all of us, over and over. God's love is nowhere more eloquently proclaimed than in the affirmation that babies, before they know about God, before they have faith, before they have done anything are all objects of God's infinite love.

But part of baptism, as well, is about community, the village. That truth transcends denominational differences and even language and culture. Two years ago a group of us were traveling in Greece. "In the Footsteps of Saint Paul." We were on the island of Santorini (where Paul never visited but probably wished he had). We were

walking up a steep winding road between shining white buildings, beneath the bluest sky I have ever seen. We passed a small church. Several of us stepped inside. When our eyes adjusted to the darkness we saw a baptism, a large group of people standing, mostly dressed in black, in the middle an elaborately attired priest and a baby, quite bare. Not wanting to intrude, we began to back out the door but by this time we were noticed, all eyes on us. We gave a friendly wave and continued our exit. They, on the other hand, were pleased. "Stay," the indicated. "Come close. Join us." So, in Reeboks, bermuda shorts and polo shirts, we joined in a

Greek Orthodox baptism. The baby was immersed in the font and his response was immediate. It was apparently cold water. Then placed in a towel while the priest changed and sang, he was handed around to a lot of people, family and friends, I assumed. As we left, a woman greeted us, in difficult English and told us that because we had participated in the baptism, we were now part of their family and community and then gave us a tiny little ribbon with a medallion of a baby's head to wear as a mark of our new status. Several of us have them still.

It takes a village ...

In a Presbyterian baptism, one question is asked of the congregation. In fact, Presbyterian baptisms happen in the context of regular public worship precisely because the community has an important part to play.

"Do you, the people of the church, promise to tell these children the good news of the gospel, to help them know all that Christianity commands, and by your fellowship to strengthen their ties to the household of God?"

The minister lets the people see the newly-baptized, symbolizing that what is happening is not only the affirmation of

a mysterious and wonderful truth about God and the child, but also about the community of faith, the church -- the village -- in which she or he is now a member in good standing.

"Remind us of the promises given in our own baptism ... ," we pray in unison. And I am reminded. I know, although I do not actually remember, the people who were present at my baptism that made promises and kept them. I tell this to every parent who brings a child here to be baptized. I tell them about Mrs. Evans, a tiny, white-haired wife of a retired dentist, a lady whose mission in life was, I think, to be the "Hound of

Heaven" for surly, unruly, uncooperative, and generally unpleasant adolescent Presbyterian boys. She was our Sunday School teacher. How she did it week after week, I'll never know. We were not a group of eager students. Quite to the contrary. We were not happy to be there. And when we graduated and went off to college or the service she continued sending us letters and little devotional guides that I used to hide in my desk drawer. I've concluded that part of the reason I am a minister is that I couldn't get away from Mrs. Evans, and I've concluded that she must have been in her pew when I was

baptized and she simply made good on her promise.

I tell every parent that. I tell them that the people in the congregation take that question very seriously; that they fully intend to be the church for you and your child; that they, on behalf of other Christians, in other places where you may end up living, fully intend to keep their promise and will be church school teachers, advisers, sponsors, counselors, mentors and friends for you and your child in all the days ahead.

And baptism points to the truth beyond our small community of faith; that

children are in trust for the future with us; that the village it takes to raise a child is sometimes the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, the United States of America.

At that level, this topic becomes difficult.

Cornel West, speaking at Rockefeller Chapel recently about his experience in the African-American Christian Church, commented that we are having a crisis in this country in all "the contexts of nurture." Nobody is tending the children. Everybody has abandoned them. Two parent families, on their own, have

never worked, he said. When you see a nuclear family that looks like it's working, you can count on the fact that there are others, probably lots of others involved: grandparents -- who are the real moral models -- aunts, uncles, almost surely a church full of surrogate aunts and uncles and grandparents.

"Without Deacon Jones and my basketball coach and my Sunday School teachers, in addition to two good parents, I wouldn't be where I am today," said Dr. Cornel West.

If it really does take a village to raise a child, our village isn't doing so well. We cherish the idea that we cherish children in America. And perhaps we do, individually. But as a community? Marian Wright Edelman writes:

"Things happen to children here that don't happen elsewhere. Every day three children die from abuse, nine are murdered, thirteen die from guns."

A recent report published by the Council on Families in America revealed that in every measurable category from health to SAT scores the quality of life for

America's children is deteriorating. Rates of delinquency, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, depression, poverty ...

The matter is complex. It will not reduce to the ideological mantras of too much government or too little government: too much money -- not enough money. But there are basic issues we ought to be able to agree on as a village. The first is that it takes a village. All of the children, in some way, belong to us. Parents are not in this alone. Another is surely that it is not a good idea for weapons designed to kill as many people as

quickly as possible to be available to our children. It may be constitutionally correct but may I suggest that it is insanity to put the full weight of government on the side of the right of a gun dealer and to sell weapons beside a public school. That is a village that has lost it heart and its mind.

There are things we can agree upon, while we are disagreeing and discussing specific political strategies. For instance, that it is a wise and conservative use of our resources to care for pregnant mothers: to do everything humanly possible to sustain

their health. Spending on children is a bargain. TIME Magazine says,

"One dollar spent in prenatal care for pregnant women saves three dollars in individual care during the first year of the infant's life. We can provide nine months of full drug treatment to a pregnant woman who is addicted for $5,000; or we can pay $30,000 to care for the addicted baby she is going to bear for twenty days."

Or, as some are proposing, we can do nothing in order to teach responsibility, in the process

sacrificing a generation of poor, mostly minority children who will, we know, make this beautiful culture and nation a nightmare for our children to resolve after we have made our point about responsibility.

Robert Bellah has written an important book, The Good Society. He writes about religion and people of faith as custodians of vision and creators of community.

"If we are fortunate enough to have the gift of faith through which we see ourselves as members of the universal community, we bear a special

responsibility. We can be ... ambassadors of trust in a fearful world." [See Cynthia Campbell One Baptism, One Body, One Community, a Sermon, April 26, 1995]

When we baptize infants it is our attempt to say something about the precious gift of community, to do more than say it, to be a community of faith in the midst of a fearful world, to show an alternative to life lived in isolation and fear and distrust, to show -- as we hold these babies close -- a picture of the human community as God intends it.

Our children need the church, the community of faith. No more, however, than we need them. "Let the children come to me," Jesus said. "For it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

He was, at that moment, talking to adults who we working very hard and intensely on being religious. It's a hectic scene. Crowds of people are showing up wherever he is. They are clamoring for his attention. They are bringing their elderly and sick and blind and crippled. They come to him at all hours: from first dawn, through the heat of midday, to evening. They come

without food and get hungry. They come without provisions for lodging. The crowd is growing. In the midst of it all, there are learned scholars from Jerusalem asking difficult questions: "Why did you say that? Why did you say this? Don't you know it's against the law?"

And here come the babies. His friends intercede. "Not now: can't you see how busy he is? It's late. We're all tired and hungry. Come back some other time."

And Jesus says:

"Let the little children come to me and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

And this ...

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

"Why doesn't anyone see God nowadays," someone asked. A wise rabbi answers that people are not willing to look that low."

"The fingerprints of God are not difficult to spot once you've found the proper angle of vision."

My friend Joanna Adams, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, tells a story that I'd like to borrow as a conclusion. It's a southern story and not an urban setting, and she could tell it much better than I. It's about the day the children of Trinity Church got lost. There was some children's event at the church. Lots of children were there and the time came for their parents to pick them up. They drove around the building, around to the back; no children anywhere. They came into

the building; no children. They became a little uneasy. Turns out all the children were sitting up in a big magnolia tree in the center of the circle in the driveway, watching and waiting for their parents to come; waiting for them to find them: hoping they would find them.

Joanna says she wonders if the children are not watching and waiting to see if we're going to raise them right. And I think that's exactly where to end this -- with the children watching and waiting to see if we're going to figure out how to be families again.

The children need the community of faith, all of us: parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, and the many of us who don't know them at all. They need all of us -- because it really does take a village. And we need every one of them -- to remind us of God's wonderful gift of life, God's amazing grace, God's gracious presence, God's love in Jesus Christ ... the One who welcomes the children, who opens his arms to us all. The one in whom the little ones -- the old ones -- and all of us are loved and cared for and forever safe. All praise to Him.